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EDITORIALS

Solve the MTBE mystery

If a product is both dangerous and costly, would you continue to buy it? Should you be forced to buy it?

Such seems to be the case with methyl tertiary butyl ether, known by its initials as MTBE. MTBE is the additive placed only in California gasoline and is meant to reduce toxic emissions.

From various reports, it now appears that traces of MTBE are leaking into some parts of the Bay Area's water supply. This week, officials announced that traces of the chemical have been found in Castaic and Pyramid lakes in Southern California. It's also been previously found in Lakes Tahoe, Donner and Shasta and Don Pedro and Pardee reservoirs. It's not enough to be harmful, but it's enough to raise warning flags.

Now, according to oil industry experts, the extra cost of MTBE is also responsible for the record high prices of gasoline in the Bay Area. Prices around here in October reached the highest level in seven years.

Two years ago, when the California Air Resources Board ruled that we must have a cleaner gasoline to meet federal clean air standards, the experts then said MTBE was perfectly safe and, oh by the way, it will only add a nickel to 15 cents to the cost of gas.

That was \$1.23 a gallon ago. Welcome to \$1.43 a gallon. Something does not add up here. Gasoline prices in the Gold Country, for instance, are still in the mid-\$1.30s, so clearly MTBE alone is not running up the pump prices.

But the combination of some incremental price and the potential danger should lead both CARB and the EPA to re-examine whether this particular chemical is really necessary and whether it alone can satisfy clean air standards. Chemistry has always seemed to find an available substitute for a given substance. The industry did it with DDT, for instance.

Price is not a controlling factor here. Our gas costs are the result of our own gas-guzzling usage, of an absence of independent competition to the majors, and total world crude oil supplies compared with that small portion which can only be used in California.

But health is the controlling issue. If MTBE has even the slightest chance of tainting our water and making us sick, it should be abandoned right now and we'll take our chances with the EPA until a substitute is found.

Of course, we don't really know the risk because full-scale studies have not yet begun. A bill proposed by state Sen. Richard Mountjoy, R-Arcadia, would provide \$500,000 to the University of California system to study the health and environmental effects of MTBE. We believe this is a good start, but both CARB and the EPA are obligated to take the lead on this issue.

The sooner these studies come to a conclusion, the better. We may have little time to play with.

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